(names obviously changed...)

--

There it was again. I knew that sound.

"Oy, they're having a fight down there!"

That was what Mona thought. I knew better. That was an old sound, from a lifetime ago. One I thought I'd finally escaped. I should have known better.

I looked out the window, counting five men holding smart phones up toward the screams. Then my feet moved of their own accord. It was only from hearing a muffled shout as the door slammed behind me that I knew I'd left the flat. The rain had just ended, and the pavement was still wet. My feet pulled me to the source of that sound. Not the shouting, not the screaming, but the one I remembered so deeply that it still hid under the table with my inner child. The sound of a head hitting a wall.

There it was again, but this time, I could see them. Both of them. The woman's head sounded like a watermelon when she slammed against the wall, sliding down those slimy bricks to finish crumpled on the filthy paving stones. Her eyes were open wide, looking stunned and frightened, as the giant advanced on her from the ten or fifteen feet from where he'd launched her. My stomach churned as the pain of that impact coursed through my own body, as if I had been the one tossed like a sack of rice into that wall.

Looking at the giant, I wanted to flee, abandon this woman to her fate. But my feet had a will of their own, carrying me right into the one spot I where didn't want to be: about 5 steps between each of them.

I realized that I'd carried an old umbrella with me out the door. At least those Kung Fu lessons had had one result: they kept me from rushing in where angels feared to tread entirely unarmed. Then again, my next thought was that this flimsy brolly was more like a liability against that big drunk guy. I took a second of comfort in hoping that as a foreign PhD student, at least the NHS would cover my hospital stay if I didn't manage to duck fast enough.

"Move!"

I flinched as the sound wave from the giant's lips struck me. It felt just like the impact of furniture breaking against the wall that night. When the giant stepped closer to me, my feet moved me back the same step, but my body refused to budge. That brolly, I now realized, was balanced in my left hand behind me, just like a short staff. My stomach had turned into a solid ball, no longer churning. As I saw him look at me, the giant's eyes suddenly grew wider. *If he hits me, it is going to hurt.* But then why did he seem to be afraid of me?

"Move!"

"No."

Who said that? Oh, wait, that was my voice. So why did the giant look confused?

"Thank you."

I risked a glance behind me. That sobbing voice had come from behind me, as the woman I was foolishly blocking wept, her tears mingling with the rain on the wall as she'd stared up at me.

Focusing on the giant as I'd learned to do in so many sparring classes, I drew a deep breath, preparing. But the giant stood frozen himself, staring at me with some odd drunken mixture of contempt and fear. Both were clearly written in his face, as well as the frustration of being denied another chance to strike the woman on the ground behind me. What was he waiting for?

"You prick."

He was treating me like a man? *He really must be drunk.* Then I realized that I'd dropped into an automatic fighting stance. He wasn't that drunk, then.

"Ok, but you should be ashamed of yourself."

As those words tore themselves from my throat, I began to tremble so violently that I thought I'd begin crying like the woman at my back. The giant looked so confused that I could practically see the gears turning in his drink-addled mind. Then, a tall woman stepped between us, her back to me, placing a hand flat upon the center of the giant's chest. I found myself letting out the breath I'd not known I was holding, and heard movement behind me.

I turned to see the two young bar girls helping the woman, finally, up off of the pavement, and taking her inside the bar. As I looked back at the giant, he had backed away, the tall woman's arm guiding him to the curb.

I stood straight, now in tears myself from the relief, and from the shock. I was still four years old, still hiding under the table, while furniture still shattered, as my mother screamed in the other room. But this time, I had not stayed hidden under the table.

This time, I had come out to help.

Lost in these thoughts, I turned down the bar girl's offer of a drink. As Mona came over, saying something I couldn't hear, I wondered where she had been during all of this. Recalling her nights of coming home drunk, I realized that she had been standing there, 20 feet away, the entire time. Now I could see her in my mind's eye, standing off to the side, just watching. As the five men and two bar girls had stood by and just watched. All standing idly by. And all but the young bar girls were bigger than me. Including my lover, who had let me stand alone.

Then, I resolved to get her out of my life. Because some lovers aren’t worth keeping.